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ABSTRACT

Rapid social change in American society calls for a flexible, self-correcting educational system. The view that achievement of such a system requires major changes in the organization and delivery of educational services and a redefinition of the entire system is examined in this educational policy bulletin. Highlights of reform research are discussed, with a focus on describing change at the local and state levels and identifying elements common to all restructuring efforts. Goals of restructuring include changing the way teaching and learning are addressed at the local level and making fundamental changes in structural arrangements. (18 references) (LMI)

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INSIGHTS ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

Number 13 September 1989

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INSIGHTS ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE
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Restructuring the Educational System

Social changes in the United States, emerging with unprecedented speed, call for an educational system that is flexible and self-correcting (see INSIGHTS Number 10, June, 1989). Many researchers and practitioners believe that, in order to achieve such a system, major changes are necessary in the way educational services are organized and delivered. The entire system (its goals, functions, policies, and structural arrangements) should be open to question and redefinition (Jenks & Shaw, 1988).

The Need for Change

Most of the reform efforts of the last decade have espoused an idea that effective change in education involves refining the existing system. The objective of this approach has been to realign or refocus school programs and practices to better meet existing goals and standards. A primary concern has been, "How can we do things right?" (Jenks & Shaw, 1988).

Eisner (1988) contends that the kinds of problems inherent in the present educational system will not be remedied simply by demanding higher standards, requiring longer school days, or adding more courses to the curriculum. Such solutions will not produce real achievement nor will they produce the kinds of thinkers, doers, and free, independent human beings who can be productive in our increasingly complex democratic society (Parish, Eubanks, Aquila, & Walker, 1989). In order to develop a system that will produce such human beings, a concern for "doing the right thing" must replace the present concern for "doing things right." Identifying new organizational configurations and restructuring the educational system to achieve these should be a long-term objective.

Too many goals and too few resources, however, combine to make maintenance and survival, rather than reform and restructuring, the top priorities in most school systems (Mann, 1988). As a result, the educational system is "encrusted with the barnacles of inherently unproductive efforts," which, according to Drucker (1974, p. 145), is often a characteristic of social service institutions. The system needs to redefine itself in the following ways (Drucker, 1974):

- Its *function and mission* need to be redefined by answering the question, "What is our business and what should it be?"

- Clear *objectives and goals* need to be derived from the definition of function and mission.

- *Priorities* of concentration need to be identified that enable targets to be selected, standards of accomplishment and performance to be set, deadlines to be targeted, results to be defined, and accountability for results to be determined.

- *Mechanisms* should be in place *to identify and discard* objectives that no longer serve a purpose or that have proven to be unattainable, programs that exhibit unsatisfactory performance, and activities that are obsolete or unproductive.

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The last requirement may be the most important one because it is difficult to abandon yesterday's success. Yesterday's success too often becomes policy, virtue, and conviction. To keep pace with a changing society, however, it is necessary for institutions continually to rethink their missions, objectives, and priorities. Organizations need to build in mechanisms so that feedback from outcomes and performance can guide future policies, priorities, and action. A success that has outlived its usefulness may, in the end, be more damaging than failure (Drucker, 1974).

The Restructuring Perspective

A working paper from the LEAD Restructuring Study Group sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, defines *restructuring* as making the necessary adjustments in rules, roles, and relationships in education so that desired changes can be made in what schools do and the kind of outcomes they produce. This means taking a critical look at all aspects of schooling — mission and goals; organization and management at the local, district, and state levels; curriculum; the structure of knowledge; instruction; modes of learning; the roles and responsibilities of educational personnel, students, and parents; school finance; and regulation and control (Harvey & Crandall, 1988).

The restructuring perspective focuses on the behavior of people in groups, i.e., how they interact, cooperate, and compete; how they view themselves within the organization; and how they view the organization in relation to themselves (Lotto, 1982). This perspective views organizing the educational system as an ongoing process of reassessing and adjusting the system to meet changing goals and priorities rather than adding practices, programs, and policies to the current system. An outcome of restructuring should be the creation of a system that anticipates changes and prepares to meet the emerging needs of learners, the community, and society. Thus, restructuring efforts should seek to identify and assess the value of trying creative, new, unique, and unfamiliar ways of organizing and delivering educational services (Jenks, 1988).

Change at the Local Level

Cohen (1987) argues that the challenge of restructuring cannot be adequately addressed through incremental changes in schooling practices. Instead, successfully restructuring the education system requires developing new approaches to local control that provide greater discretion to individual schools. Researchers (Boyer, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Sizer, 1984) have consistently pointed out that reform in education requires change to take place at the building level rather than being imposed from the top down. This implies that those people responsible for the success of the school must have authority to implement the changes they believe are necessary.

The key management problem for district leadership is how to create a district-level organization that adequately supports school-level objectives (Elmore, 1988). Because local schools are embedded in the larger educational system, they are constrained by the allocation of resources and the distribution of authority. Cohen notes that many functions typically are performed at the central office level in a uniform manner for all schools. One of the problems faced by schools in pilot restructuring programs is that they are locked into various policies and procedures developed at district and state levels ("Early Experiences," 1989).

For significant change to occur, districts must provide schools with a combination of autonomy, flexibility, technical assistance, and support. In a study of the factors that were most important in the process of implementing local school improvement, Anderson, et al. (1987) identified several key variables for school-improvement program success. Their findings

indicate that, among other factors, there is a great need for initiation, leadership, commitment, and management by top administrators. Without central leadership support, schools' efforts to change are less successful. Therefore, change at the school level must be accompanied by changes at all levels of the system for real improvement to take place.

Elements Common to Restructuring Efforts

While restructuring efforts grow out of the visions created to reflect the realities of the communities they serve (Harvey & Crandall, 1988), most appear to have certain elements in common. Mirman (1988) identified the following common themes that emerged from the literature and from current restructuring efforts:

1. School goals and activities are designed to meet the needs of all students.
2. There is active involvement of all constituencies in the school community.
3. There is a humanization of the organizational climate.
4. Good thinking pervades the classrooms and the schools.
5. Responsibility for leadership of the school is shared.
6. Relationships between schools and higher education institutions link research, development, and practice.
7. Desired changes and successes are publicized throughout the school community.

Participants at the Florida Conference on School Restructuring held during November, 1988, drew on their experiences and identified the following elements as those which accounted for the success of their system-wide restructuring efforts (*Restructuring Education: The Florida Experience*, 1988): decentralization of authority, union cooperation, participative management, teamwork, training, teachers helping teachers, educational research, instructional technology, school-business partnerships, and a willingness to take risks.

Change at the State Level

The greatest challenge in redesigning the educational system is to achieve significant changes in the way local districts and states relate to schools (Elmore, 1988). According to Cohen (1987, p. 3), the necessary changes "will affect virtually every aspect of the structure and operations of the education system, from the schoolhouse to the state house." Cohen (1987) suggests that states provide leadership by articulating a vision of restructured schools, encouraging local experimentation with various school structures, reducing unnecessary administrative and regulatory barriers to experimentation, providing ongoing support and technical assistance to schools and districts trying new approaches, and researching and disseminating results to other schools.

Conclusion

The following references include just a few of the researchers, policy makers, and practitioners who have written about the need for changing the structure of the educational system. They have highlighted the need for identifying new concepts for implementing system-wide change. The consensus is that adjusting and tinkering with our current horse-and-buggy system will not be sufficient to meet the needs of students entering the twenty-first century. While the ultimate goal of restructuring is change at the school level in the way teaching and learning are addressed, fundamental changes in roles, relationships, and authority patterns must take place at all levels of the system. The task is not an easy one, but it is considered by many to be essential for our vitality as a nation.

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